BASES OF A SOCIOLOGICAL ECONOMY: FROM FRANÇOIS SIMIAND AND MAURICE HALBWACHS TO PIERRE BOURDIEU

Frédéric Lebaron
Collège de France-EHESS-CNRS

ABSTRACT

Pierre Bourdieu's contribution to the field of "economic sociology" is of both a "methodological" and "positive" nature, according to the vocabulary used by the Durkheimian sociologists. It expands, systematizes and goes beyond some proposals and results of the "founders" of this area of the discipline, specifically, François Simiand and Maurice Halbwachs, whose contributions are still very often underestimated. Like Simiand and Halbwachs, Pierre Bourdieu presents a project for the *reconstruction* of economic theory based on rigorous empirical investi-gation. It takes the common errors of both methods into account. Yet, it is based on all the preexistent forms of knowledge, incorporating and even going beyond them. Through the reflexive use of investigation and statistics, Bourdieu points to the progressive development of a sociological economy likely to compete with the dominant economic theory.

Of all the sociologists of the Durkheimian school, François Simiand is undoubtedly the most significant—in particular for historians of the *Annales* school. They consider him, if not a "founding father," an inspirer and a weapon in their scientific struggles.[1] He is also the most ignored by contemporary scholars. Even when they work within fields such as "economic sociology," where *he* was strongly engaged. In the *Handbook of Economic Sociology*, edited by Neil J. Smelser and Richard Swedberg, published in Princeton in 1994, there is only one mention of Simiand in the introduction, as Durkheim's student (Smelser, Swedberg, 1994, p.12)[2] —as well as Halbwachs's. For some thirty years, Simiand attempted to establish economics as a positive science by making it an area of general sociology.[3] In the end, it would appear he has failed (at least according to contemporary international research). Apparently, the case is closed: the ambition to establish an economy entirely based on sociology, thereby replacing the conventional economy, methodologically flawed, would be both utopian and excessive.[4]

However, Simiand's "radical" project had implications beyond the already undeniable upheaval born from the development of quantitative economic and social history, all to the detriment of the old worship of the "three idols" (political, individual and chronological) which limited the progress of traditional history (Simiand, 1903). Though barely mentioned, seldom read and often considered to be "difficult," he

remains current in contemporary social science research. Precisely because he tried to lay some of the foundations necessary for the development of a definite sociological economy. The work of Maurice Halbwachs followed in Simiand's wake. It helped to strengthen the credibility of this project's feasibility by shaping it, mainly in the areas of housing and worker consumption (Baudelot, Establet, 1994). The work of Pierre Bourdieu, and for that matter all research that builds upon "genetic structuralism" in economics,[5] can be considered in some ways an outcome and an extension of this project.

Many parallels are drawn between the scientific trajectories of François Simiand and Maurice Halbwachs and that of Pierre Bourdieu. Like Simiand (Gillard, Rosier (eds.), 1996) and Halbwachs (de Montlibert (ed.), 1997), Bourdieu actually began his sociological research as a critical rationalist philosopher who *broke away from* the philosophical scholastic circles (Pinto, 1999). Coming from a humble family, he, like them, was a *normalien*. Recognized by the republican school institution, he abandoned the canonical trajectory of "philosopher of the Republic" which was offered to him so that he could confront the political economic issues of his time. Undeniably engaged in the Algerian crisis, he never became a professional activist, nor at the time did he subscribe to the prevailing form of "Marxism." Like them, he truly foresaw in empirical sociological research the core of his intellectual and political engagement. He considered that sociology—specifically "economic" sociology, or, better said, sociology that dares to systematically challenge the economic theory as did Marx, Durkheim and Weber (Gislain, Steiner, 1995)—must be theoretically inventive and based on studies which dare to systematically challenge investigations known as "quantitative" while taking on the "quantitative/qualitative" opposition. It must do this without reifying statistics, the mere product of an interpretive work. In the end, Simiand, Halbwachs and Bourdieu all achieved international notoriety and were scientifically acknowledged through their election to the Collège de France.

The most significant connections are undoubtedly those which refer to the project and the very nature of a sociological economy. They are organized around four major themes: the epistemology of economic science; the methodology, particularly the design of statistics; the place granted to the economic characters/agents; and finally, the importance attached to a social theory of value. At first, this article will mainly focus on an analysis of the first two themes, both relating back to the theoretical bases of the sociological economy.

A CRITICAL RATIONALIST ECONOMY

A significant amount of Simiand's intellectual energy focused on the epistemology and methodology of social sciences, and more particularly on the criticism of the *wrong erudite outlooks* and the *wrong categories*. This orientation results from the central position, in the scientific activity, occupied by the "polemic of reason," without which research would likely be reduced to the ecumenical pursuit of

academic consensus. Like other Durkheimians, Simiand indeed spent much time critically reading economic, economic sociology and general sociology works of his time. He participated in debates, sometimes violent, because his critical inventory was meant to be a contribution to the advancement of knowledge. Sometimes, it was in the form of fierce comments on the coarsest, but also most subtle, errors. That earned him a reputation of being a vigorous and intractable polemist, hardly worried about academic hierarchical precedence.

In fact, behind this critical outlook, a unified design of social science took shape. Rooted in Comte, it aimed at exceeding the false cleavages inherited from the mainly arbitrary history of academic institutions. At the turn of the century, it is this outlook that led him to send historians a now famous formal warning. It targeted above all their thought processes and habitual practices, much more than the works of Seignobos or his counterparts did (Simiand, 1903). Indeed, because of their practices, historians tend to consider "historical facts" as an unexplainable singularity and to deny any properly explanatory ambition for historical analysis. By making the research of statistical regularities one of the central approaches of scientific historians, Simiand disputed both the accumulation of "facts" lacking any theoretical principle and the refusal to seek some non-contingent antecedents behind the "events." He considered the necessity principle a basis for scientific research, in social as well as natural sciences.

According to Simiand, the major "fatal" error made in the development of a scientific economy is, among others and without doubt, the essentially "normative" character of the outlook "conceptual" or "ideological" economists take (Simiand, 1932a, p. 541–556). Economists studying wages often question at first their legitimate level and what they "should" be in an "ideally" operating economy. Some consider the adjustment of wages as a "standard" likely to be used to study reality. This form of abstraction cannot however be reduced to a *moment* in the analysis—that would validate it—but rather heavily influences it in its entirety, leading economists to be diverted from the understanding of reality itself.

In the same way, economists engaged in the labor union or social movements tend to consider the wage claim as some sort of finalist postulate. It hinders them in their truly positive study of wage formation methods and of the causes of their rise or fall (Simiand, 1932a, p. 532–541). Therefore, they cannot accept one of Simiand's principal empirical conclusions, i.e. that upward wage movements depend mainly on the phases of the global economic dynamics in which the economy is placed, and that in the long run they are more influenced by money supply movements than by wage claims (Simiand, 1932a, 1932b).

During his "younger years," as well as in his "mature period," Simiand confronted in his work this critical outlook with erroneous erudite classifications, evidence of a misunderstanding of the nature of science in general and social science in particular. He therefore tackled the everyday usage of the concept of "social economy," conceived in opposition to the "political" economy, thanks to the fact that it would treat different objects than the mechanisms usually designed as "economics."

Simiand vigorously disputed that a good definition of the scientific language vocabulary is a condition of the advances in knowledge, just as much as the construction of scientifically tested systems of classification (Simiand, 1932a).

Pierre Bourdieu goes beyond this outlook, both rationalist and critical, by relying on a fundamental assumption of the sociology of scientific knowledge: scientific "errors" find their principle in the social obstacles to the acquisition of knowledge (Bourdieu, Chamboredon, Passeron, 1968). The *scholastic fallacy*, in particular, rises from the particular position of the researcher within the social space (Bourdieu, 1994, Bourdieu, 1997a): cut off from real practice, the researcher tends to mistake the "model of reality" for the "reality of the model," and to give as principles of practice the result of a conceptual reconstruction which depends in fact on his/her own position out of the practice space.

The classification systems used by researchers are always likely to be contaminated by preexisting social classifications: political, religious, and the most ordinary common sense categories all filter in the speech and the mental structures of scientists to such a degree that it generates some kind of "educated or half-educated common sense" which functions like a system of intellectual requirements, self-censorship or pre-formed representations of the reality studied. This is particularly the case with a certain number of economic categories, such as "market," an "intellectual myth (...) never defined and never discussed," because it refers to some genuine blatancies (Bourdieu, 1997b, p. 50). It is also the case of the implicit presuppositions of the theory of action, "the imaginary anthropology" of "rational action theory" (ibid, p. 64) which bases the repre-sentation of a scheming and hedonistic isolated agent on a "deductivist epistemology," and on an "intellectualist" social philosophy, "atomic and discontinuing," all the more widespread that it is socially legitimated. Indeed, this is where the Durkheimian heritage of Pierre Bourdieu's[6] work clearly shows up. And, at the same time, he goes beyond that legacy by providing the principle of a properly sociological explanation of epistemological errors.

Rather than on a normative posture, the social effectiveness of the economic theory is based on the permeability of the scientists to the ordinary and half-educated common sense. In fact, the neo-classic economic theory can give the illusion that it accounts for practices, because, objectively orchestrated by the *habitus*, those lean towards regularities which one can easily but fictitiously deduce from a simplified model of action (Bourdieu, 1974, 1980). It is therefore with empirical work, and in particular with the analysis of statistical regularities built by the researcher according to a logic inspired by experimentation, that one can decide between the most relevant causal assumptions, without reifying the statistical instrument and without relying too heavily on the "evidence" which is the result of a technical use of the operations of investigation (Bourdieu, Chamboredon, Passeron, 1968).

REFLEXIVE AND CONSTRUCTIVIST STATISTICS

In a positive approach, social science, as Simiand and Halbwachs conceived it, is mainly based on a *systematic reflexive use of statistics*, considered as a substitute to experience in the field of historical sciences, and on the integration of the theory requirements, in particular the requirements of *causal explanation*, resulting from life sciences, the core of empirical research on the social world. Simiand and Halbwachs resorted to much investigation data without, however, yielding to a naive form of empiricism, which would reduce science to an accumulation of data obtained independently of any suitable theoretical research. "The discrediting of statistics lies in the fact that statistics have often been founded, indeed, on some bad observation, or more often still, in the fact that they have been badly read, badly interpreted, are lacking in sufficient technique or criticism, taken out of context, or are deprived of the restrictions or counterparts which give to observation its true meaning" (Simiand, 1932a, quoted in Simiand, 1987, p.285).

On the contrary, critical sociologists spend part of their time deconstructing and reconstructing investigative data, gathered by others, to give them meaning in a framework of theoretical problems often foreign to those who have carried out the data collection. "[The data] is not, in most cases, gathered by other economists (at least for the elementary observation), and for a clear-cut economics research purpose, but by some other category of people and for some other purpose" (Simiand, 1932, quoted in Simiand, 1987, p. 370).

Government statistics provide a sample of these data gathered according to practical and normative considerations, mostly heterogeneous with the scientific activity itself, but not gathered without guiding principles. Indeed, they come from the social conditions under which the government officials are placed. Far from avoiding their use, the sociologist must in fact work to restore all the stages of data collection, the issues the statistician raises, the operations perceived as legitimate, etc., to integrate them within his/her own data construction work. "Accuracy critique" and "capacity critique" are crucial to estimating the quality of the observations and their relevance with respect to the questions the researcher tries to answer.

Here, the example of the price data is essential. Simiand devoted much time to this painstaking task over several decades (Simiand, 1932a). Refusing the use of aggregate indexes, and criticizing the usual addition operations performed "to make [the data] readable," Simiand did not target statistical sophistication. Rather, he targeted the fact that the data collection was not accounted for. The claims made to erase the very conditions of this collection and to create artifacts do not make sense anymore. He devoted long developments, sometimes considered tiresome by readers in a hurry to get "to the facts," to restore, on the contrary, all the stages of the data preparation. This when the proper theoretical and explanatory use of it is at stake. He privileged temporal data ("joint observations") over comparisons in space ("concomitant observations"), because he was aware that bad quality data of a homogeneous nature are preferable to essentially heterogeneous data, to extract true connections between variables. He sought

to reach phenomena "in the making," which he called "effective phenomenoscopy," a condition close in social sciences to the experimental situation, which consists of approaching at most a direct observation of the data.

Simiand put much emphasis on the quality and nature of the data collected, because he adopted, early on, both a constructivist and critical vision of the statistical operation, which does not allow disregarding the very value of data supposed to provide a basis to sociological experiments. Thus, as early as 1898, he criticized Durkheim's *Le Suicide*, precisely because of some limits he pointed out in the adequacy between the hypothesis and the data quality (Simiand, 1898). Like Durkheim, Simiand refused to see that a high correlation coefficient between two variables meant there was proof of their effective causal connection in social reality. The search for the causal link also implies a construction work not reduced to the demonstration of a high correlation coefficient.

In fact, Simiand believed that the most general and closest antecedent to a phenomenon, which constitutes its "cause" in a strict sense, must emerge from the multiplication of the successive experiments undertaken with the purpose of establishing this link from the undisputable and best established data in accordance with the precepts of the "effective phenomenoscopy."

In his work on the budgets of blue-collar workers (Halbwachs, 1912a), Halbwachs showed a combination of rigor and inventiveness in the interpretation of data. It revealed different principles of variations intermingled with the workers expenditure. He took a step-by-step approach, at first establishing that the distribution of the expenditure differed between workers and employees with equal income. And then by studying the internal variations within the workers group, related in particular to the incomes and the size of the family. Having thus built specific profiles of expenditure, he identified then a general tendency to overconsumption of food and street culture, but also showed the fine variations around this predominant lifestyle (Baudelot, Establet, 1994, chap. 5).

In his thoughts on statistics, strongly inspired by Simiand (Halbwachs, 1912b), Halbwachs questioned the use of the average and the "law of the great numbers" as instruments of the study of social reality. Social reality is the product of an unsteady balance between organized forces, such as the social power struggle bringing about the regularities observed, and the workers driven away from the heart of the social values, being opposed to more integrated categories. Thanks to Halbwachs, one can mention "heterogeneous statistics" as Christian Baudelot and Roger Establet do. Like Simiand, he refused to reduce the social facts to some *a priori* established, simple mathematical laws. He considered that the social conditions of data collection prohibited a brutal use of the probability theory applied to social facts.

During his "Algerian period" (Bourdieu, 1977), and later in his research done at the Centre de Sociologie Européenne in the field of sociology of education and culture (Bourdieu, 1979, Bourdieu, 1989), Pierre Bourdieu used various data produced by the government statistical apparatus, in addition to the data he collected with his team, by means of questionnaires. Furthermore, he entertained a dialogue with the

government statisticians, at the ENSAE where he taught, and with the INSEE. He introduced radical issues on the conditions of data collection, which concerned specifically the concept of "unemployment" (Merllié, 1989), in his work on Algeria. To understand some of the differences in the unemployment rates observed in colonial Algeria, it is indeed necessary to keep in mind the fact that the acknowledgment of the concept of "unemployment" by a group or an individual depends on the degree of insertion of this individual or this group in the capitalist economy.

And yet, it would be absurd to suggest that the statistical operation is useless. It implies, to be effective and relevant, a preliminary analysis of the social conditions of its realization and of the significance involved in the data produced (Gollac, 1994). Statistical work itself is registered in social reality. The categories used are more or less crystallized in reality, more or less formatted, and in return also exert an effect of legitimization (as for example the social and economic categories which contribute to the existence of groups) (Boltanski, 1982, Desrosières and Thévenot, 1988). On the contrary, they could also result in economic and social dispute (for example in the case of the data on the "inequalities" generally produced for activist purposes).

Statisticians, sociologists, and economists are social agents with their own interests, impulses, and preconceived categories. And the analysis of these obstacles to knowledge makes it possible to achieve objective knowledge, thanks to an awareness of the limits on the knowledge it produces. Thus, a statistical construction is a social construction, and a reflexive sociology must also study statistical work, particularly in the fields where it is at stake: in economics, but also in the areas of justice, or education.

Refusing the positivist and instrumental posture which makes some econometric method the only source of empirical validation, Bourdieu is, in contrast, somewhat responsible for the success of the multidimensional data analysis method, both in the study of the educational system (Bourdieu, 1989), and the study of markets (Bourdieu, 1990). These studies do not forgo the description of the structure properties in favor of the search for "explanatory factors." Bourdieu refused to reduce the search for statistical connections to the routine use of tests of independence. He developed, through the construction of the concept of social space and that of *field*, a geometrical and structural design of social reality far removed from the vision of the engineers of the social field, who seek above all the means of acting from the outside on a social reality and who pre-establish their variables for means of political or economic intervention.

Reflexive sociology then appears to be a specific practice of investigation, which exceeds at once positivism (represented in the 1960s in sociology by the work of Lazarsfeld) and the theoricism of philosophical origin (as expressed today with sociologists such as Giddens or Luhmann). The real issue is the modeling of reality. Not to forget however practical logic to the benefit of logical logic, by relying on limited experiments carried out in a critical manner, from the point of view of an explanation and a forecast, but without any instrumentalist prejudice.

In view of the couple "economic theory math/official statistics" which currently structures the economic field, he points out that the economic theory can also be built in and by the investigation, on the condition of making this a continuous test of the researcher's theory. And, far from being stopped by epistemology and methodology, the sociological economy conceived in this manner has accumulated hypotheses and results which contribute to the questioning of the postulates of the neo-classic theory.

Therefore, with Pierre Bourdieu, one finds an echo of the "basic" project of Simiand and Halbwachs as far as the sociological economic theory is concerned. This project is entirely reconsidered in the light of the sociology of knowledge and of a socio-analysis of the theoretical and statistical operation. It is a matter of reconstructing the foundation of an economic theory without discrediting all that has been produced under this label. Quite to the contrary, it is giving academic research another practical orientation, associated particularly with statistical construction and, moreover, with a reflexive awareness of the inseparable scientific and social operations of all kinds that the researcher is led to carry out.

NOTES

1. On this topic, see the various communications made during the colloquium in honor of François Simiand held in Paris in 1992, cf. Gillard, Rosier, 1996.
2. In the same quote, Neil J. Smelser refers to Halbwachs (p.12) and Mauss (p.12). Mauss is quoted once more in the *Handbook* for his work on the gift (p.739). Durkheim is the subject of 14 quotes altogether, as well as Pierre Bourdieu.
3. He did so by contributing, first, to the *Année sociologique* where he was in charge of the "economic sociology" section, and later when teaching at the Centre National des Arts et Métiers, at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales and then at the Collège de France.
4. It is this aspect of Simiand's work that aroused the skepticism of some writers, in spite of their awareness of his work's theoretical and empirical contributions (Gislain, Steiner, 1995; Steiner, 1996). They considered Simiand absorbed into an overly "radical" project to renew economy in contrast to conventional economy. The critical—not to say polemical—dimension of his writings would explain his lack of success.
5. Besides Pierre Bourdieu's works, see the works of Gabrielle Balazs and Jean-Pierre Faguer (Balazs, Faguer, 1979), Luc Boltanski (Boltanski, 1982), Marie-France Garcia (Garcia, 1986), Michel Gollac (Gollac, 1994), Odile Henry (Henry, 1992), Frédéric Lebaron (Lebaron, 1997), Louis Pinto (Pinto, 1989), Abdelmalek Sayad (Sayad, 1986), etc.
6. Simiand himself analyzed this philosophy of action in a very critical manner, by denying it any empirical pertinence (Simiand, 1912). He then left vague the social bases of the strength of the "individualist" model in economics.

REFERENCES

Balazs Gabrielle, Faguer Jean-Pierre. 1979. " Jeunes à tout faire et petit patronat en déclin," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 26/27, p. 49–55.

Baudelot Christian, Establet Roger. 1994. *Maurice Halbwachs. Consommation et société*, Paris: PUF.

Boltanski Luc. 1982. *Les cadres. La formation d'un groupe social*, Paris: Minuit.

Bourdieu Pierre. 1974. "Avenir de classe et causalité du probable, " *Revue française de sociologie*, 15, 1, pp. 3–42.

———. 1977. *Algérie 60. Structures économiques et structures temporelles*, Paris: Minuit.

———. 1979. *La distinction. Critique sociale du jugement*, Paris: Minuit.

———. 1980. *Le sens pratique*, Paris: Minuit.

———. 1989. *La noblesse d'Etat. Grands corps et grandes écoles*, Paris: Minuit.

———. 1990. With Bouhedja S., Christin R., Givry C. " Un placement de père de famille. La maison individuelle : spécificité du produit et logique du champ de reproduction," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 81–82, p. 6–33.

———. 1994. *Raisons pratiques. Sur la théorie de l'action*, Paris: Seuil.

———. 1997a. *Méditations pascaliennes*, Paris: Seuil.

———. 1997b. "Le champ économique," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 119, p. 48–65.

———., Chamboredon J.-C., & Passeron J.-C. 1968. *Le métier de sociologue*, Paris-La Haye: Mouton

Desrosières Alain, & Thévenot Laurent. 1988. *Les catégories socio-professionnelles*, Paris: La découverte.

Garcia, Marie-France. 1986. "La construction sociale d'un marché parfait : le marché au cadran de Fontaines-en-Sologne." *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 65, p. 2–13.

Gillard, Lucien, & Rosier Michel. 1996. *François Simiand (1873–1935). Sociologie-Histoire-Economie*. Paris: Editions des Archives Contemporaines.

Gislain, Jean-Jacques, & Steiner Philippe. 1995. *La sociologie économique. 1890-1920*, Paris: PUF.

Gollac, Michel. 1994. *Donner sens aux données. L'exemple des enquêtes statistiques sur les conditions de travail*. Paris: CEE, Dossier 3 (nouvelle série).

Halbwachs, Maurice. 1912a. *La classe ouvrière et les niveaux de vie*. Paris: Alcan.

———. 1912b. *La théorie de l'homme moyen, essai sur Quételet et la statistique morale.* thèse de doctorat ès lettres.

Henry, Odile. 1992. "Entre savoir et pouvoir. Les professionnels de l'expertise et du conseil." *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 95, p. 37–54.

Merllié, Dominique. 1989. "La construction statistique." In Champagne, Patrick et al., *Initiation à la pratique sociologique.* Paris: Dunod.

Montlibert de Christian (dir.) 1997. *Maurice Halbwachs. 1877-1945.* Strasbourg, Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg.

Pialoux, Michel. 1979. "Jeunes sans avenir et travail intérimaire." *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 26 /27, p. 19–47.

Pinto, Louis. 1999. *Pierre Bourdieu et la théorie du monde social*, Paris: Albin Michel.

Sayad, Abdelmalek. 1986. " "Coûts" et "profits" de l'immigration. Les présupposés d'un débat économique." *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 61, p. 79–82.

Simiand, François. 1898. "Compte rendu de E.Durkheim "Le suicide, études de sociologie." p. 641–651, Etudes critiques : L'Année sociologique. *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, repris dans Simiand, 1987, p. 85–86.

———. 1903. "Méthode historique et science sociale. Etude critique : à propos des ouvrages récents de M.Lacombe et M.Seignobos." *Revue de synthèse historique*, 1, p. 1–22., et p. 122-157, repris dans Simiand, 1987, p. 113–169.

———. 1912. *La méthode positive en science économique.* Paris: Alcan.

———. 1932a. *Le salaire, l'évolution sociale et la monnaie. Essai de théorie expérimentale du salaire.* Paris: Alcan, extraits dans Simiand, 1987, p. 359–512.

———. 1932b. *Les fluctuations économiques à longue période et la crise mondiale.* Paris: Alcan.

———. 1987. *Méthode historique et sciences sociales. Choix et présentation de Marina Cedronio.* Paris: Editions des archives contemporaines.

Smelser N. J., & Swedberg R. (Eds). 1994. *The Handbook of Economic Sociology.* Princeton, Princeton University Press.

Steiner P. "La sociologie économique dans L'Année sociologique (1897–1913)." In Gillard, Rosier (Eds), 1996.